

POLITICS OF FLOODS AND FEAR DURING PRE-15TH GENERAL ELECTION IN MALAYSIA: AN ANALYSIS

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Abstract

UMNO's call to put pressure on the Malaysian government, under the leadership of Ismail Sabri, to hold the GE15 during the flood season, which is expected to start in November 2022 until March 2023, was observed to have surprised many parties. In fact, this call was responded to by Ismail Sabri's announcement in the UMNO assembly stating that the parliament will be dissolved in the near future to make way for the GE15, which also confirmed that it was likely that the election would be held during the flood season in Malaysia. Finally, on October 10, 2022, Ismail Sabri announced the dissolution of the 14th parliament and confirmed that the GE15 will be held during the flood season in Malaysia. This announcement has created an atmosphere of panic and fear among the people because Malaysia will generally be hit by a flood season during the specified period. Therefore, this research aims to identify how the flood season affects the ideas for the GE15. The conceptual framework proposed in this research is political distrust of the government and the setting of political agendas that will influence voters' behaviour. This research is relevant and has its own importance due to the fact that research related to floods during the general election in Malaysia has not been carried out before. It provides a new approach when focusing on how floods affect the course of elections in Malaysia, in addition to introducing a new landscape in national politics. The results of this study found that the GE15 in Malaysia will most likely not represent the true voice of the people of this country because it is held during the flood season. This is because it would have reduced the voting percentage due to weather factors that may cause people to refuse to go out to vote. In conclusion, the politics of flood and fear have the potential to influence voters' behaviour of going out to vote or otherwise, and would have an impact on the outcome of the election results.

Keywords: GE15, Floods, Malaysia General Election, Politic, Perception

Introduction

Until October 2022, the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), through some of their highest leadership members, has called for the Malaysian parliament to be dissolved so that the 15th Malaysian General Election (GE15) can be held as soon as possible, which is said to aim at forming a more stable government. UMNO's proposal for the dissolution of parliament to hold the GE15 was decided jointly in the party's Supreme Council meeting even though the insistence had long been voiced by UMNO through presenting the interests of the people as their¹ propaganda.² Following the decision, Ismail Sabri had assured that he would present the proposed dissolution date to the Yang di-Pertuan Agong. Finally, on October 10, 2022, Ismail Sabri announced the dissolution of the 14th parliament and confirmed that the GE15 will be held during the flood season in Malaysia.³ It thus raised the public's concern that the GE15 will

take place during flash floods and thunderstorms if it is held after mid-November. People's concerns are seen to be based on the forecast by the Malaysian Meteorological Department (MetMalaysia), which predicts that the North East Monsoon will bring continuous heavy rain starting mid-November and potentially cause severe flooding.⁴ In fact, the United States (US) embassy has issued a bad weather warning to the country's citizens in Malaysia in preparation for heavy rain, storms and floods starting next month. Based on the warnings issued on the website of the US Embassy in Kuala Lumpur, the people of the country are reminded to prepare for the Tropical Cyclone season in the South Pacific Ocean from November 1 to April 30, 2023.⁵ According to the warning, Malaysia is at risk of being hit by prolonged rainstorms and catastrophic floods during the Tropical Cyclone season, which may cause utility supplies such as water and electricity to be cut off for several days.⁶ Looking at the warnings stated, it is not impossible that similar situation may happen due to a flood disaster, such as the one that occurred in Baling, Kedah which disrupted the quality of raw water of Sungai Muda⁷ and had resulted in the distribution of water supply in Penang to be disrupted as well.⁸

From another aspect, the call made by UMNO, leading to the dissolution of the 14th parliament, has shown that the pace of Malaysian politics is very difficult to predict. Through the Sheraton Steps and eventually leading to the formation of Perikatan Nasional (PN), it has restored the dominance of Barisan Nasional (BN) in national politics even though they were hit by the decision of the Federal Court by upholding the conviction and sentence of 12 years in prison and a fine of RM210 million faced by the former Prime Minister, Najib Razak in the case of misappropriation of RM42 million of funds belonging to SRC International Sdn. Bhd.⁹ The stated call also challenges the survival of other political parties such as the Parti Pribumi Bersatu Malaysia (BERSATU), Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS), Democratic Action Party (DAP), Parti Keadilan Rakyat (PKR), Parti Amanah Negara (PAN), Parti Pejuang Tanahair (PEJUANG) and others involved in the GE15.

This decade, the whole world faces major disasters that hit many countries such as China and the European region which experienced severe drought¹⁰, while Pakistan experienced a major flood that occurred since June 2022 and caused the death of more than 1,000 people.¹¹ Global climate change is said to be the main cause of the disasters and Malaysia also encountered it when in recent years, large unexpected floods often occur, including in states that have never experienced such events. As of October 2022, several states have been hit by floods. Clearly, flooding is a natural phenomenon that often occurs in the form of disasters and brings high risk to the population involved. The World Meteorological Organisation (WMO) has declared flood tragedy as the third largest natural disaster after earthquakes and volcanic eruptions, which have caused death and destruction of property. The frequency of floods that occur today in Malaysia has created an uneasy atmosphere among the population at risk, because the floods can occur at any time.

Flood disasters that occur do not follow the original cycle due to human behaviour that have no concern for environmental protection. The situation that is happening now seems like a punishment to all so that we take better care of the environment to guarantee a better life. In fact, through past experience, we can observe that Malaysia is still in the process of learning how to manage floods due to calls for Malaysia to emulate the Netherlands¹² in managing floods, even though Malaysia during the leadership of Dr. Mahathir Mohamad had established a close cooperation with Japan in disaster management.¹³ In another aspect, we see that Malaysia still fails to manage floods well because it is rooted in Malaysia's failure to control water resources for a long time, even though Johor still supplies raw water resources to Singapore. This situation shows that through the factors mentioned, it has an impact on

Malaysia's failure to manage floods well because floods also occur through failure to preserve water supply management.

According to the records, the Election Commission (SPR) once handled election affairs in a rainy season situation, namely during the GE10 in 1999 (GE10), where the parliament was dissolved in October and polling day was in November. However, it was reported that even though at that time the rainy season had started in the East Coast states, no polling station was affected by flooding.¹⁴ It is believed that this situation becomes a reference to UMNO in their call for elections to be held during the monsoon season in Malaysia. Of course, the atmosphere will not be the same because the people will definitely look at their interests before voting in the GE15. This study aims to observe how the flood season influence the idea for the 15th Malaysian general election. This study is relevant and has its own importance due to the fact that research related to this issue during the general election in Malaysia has not been carried out among researchers before. In fact, this research provides a new approach when focusing on how floods affect the course of elections in Malaysia even though there is research related to the influence of water (water politics) in previous Malaysian elections.¹⁵ In addition, this research has introduced a new landscape in the political discussion of our country when the politics of flood has been introduced and discussed specifically.

Research related to the politics of floods and fear during the pre-15th general election in Malaysia has never been conducted by any party in our country. In fact, research related to how floods would affect the political course of the country is not emphasized by scholars even though as stated before, there was research related to the influence of water (water politics) in Malaysian elections. Nevertheless, there are still some internal writing references, for example, how floods shaped the civilization and history of our country. Ishak, Mohamed Dali and Abdul Razak (2014), have stated that people of the Peninsular Malaysia have actually been exposed to flood disasters for a long time, especially for those who live around areas that are easily affected by floods, including major floods. In addition to the destruction, there are various diseases caused by flood water that can be damaging for human health and lead to mental stress or trauma to them.¹⁶ This situation clearly shows that the impact of floods is very devastating, as described in the history of our country. Although it is not related to the election, but if the election takes place during the flood season, the effect must be indescribable.

Research related to how the politics of floods may affect the course of elections abroad has attracted the attention of foreign scholars. For example, Roberts (2003) has stated that the results of the German election in 2002 were influenced by a serious flood that occurred a few weeks before voting day. This situation has caused the Social Democratic Party of Germany (SPD) to win this election by defeating the Party of Democratic Socialism (Germany) (PDS). But due to the flood, it gave a challenge to the newly formed government to strengthen the German economy after the flood.¹⁷ This situation was also supported by Rudolph and Khun (2018), who reported results of the effect of the 2002 and 2013 floods in Germany on the turnout in federal and state elections in Saxony and Bavaria, which were conducted a few weeks after the floods. It has had a negative impact on voter turnout in addition to increasing election travel expenses.¹⁸

Meanwhile, Arceneaux and Stein (2006) have stated that the people will blame the elected representatives (mayors) if they fail to prepare for floods in the area they represent. This is because the people have realized that they live in an area that can be badly affected by the flood and this influences who gets blamed for flood preparation. It echos the consideration of the consequences of attribution psychology for voting patterns and election results.¹⁹ Based

on Bovan, Banai and Banai (2018), floods had an impact on voting behaviour in the 2014 and 2015 elections in Croatia. Voters from flooded areas reduced their support for the incumbent government and the president in the election following the floods. Furthermore, the election campaign and government assistance during the campaigning process did not affect the vote and behaviour of the population during the election.²⁰

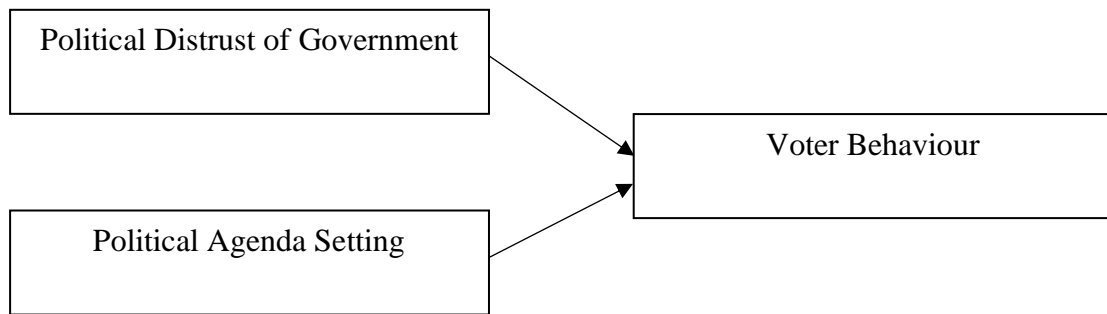
Birch (2022) finds that general elections in the United Kingdom (2015, 2017 and 2019) in partisan electoral benefit from one election to the next, calls into question the blind retrospection and rally-round-the-leader explanations which are often advanced to account for electoral reactions to natural disasters. Instead, changing party positions on environmental issues appear to account more convincingly for shifts in electoral support in response to flooding. This suggests that parties can derive benefit from, or be punished for, the positions they take on environmental issues when extreme weather events affect citizens.²¹ According to Christopher Achen dan Larry Bartels (2016), unexpected natural calamities like floods, tornadoes, and droughts, lower the vote share of incumbents in forthcoming elections. This situation is based on retrospective voting theory that serves as the foundation for this concept. It is well recognised that the electorate will react to the incumbent's performance by rewarding or penalising her in an election.²²

Conceptual Framework

The role of fear becomes clear when politicians spread fear or create anxiety in the society. One of them is the concern about holding elections during the flood season. It can be a useful tool and campaign for politicians from either the ruling party or the opposition to achieve their goals. If the election is held after the flood, it will pose a risk to the ruling party. Voters tend to punish the government for failing to manage the natural disaster.²³

On the other hand, if the election takes place before or during the flood season, it may save the government. Not to mention if the government's position is deteriorating. Turnout was low due to heavy rain or voters being trapped in floods. This situation will bring victory to the government.²⁴ The fear or anxiety of this society will be felt collectively and there is a common understanding of what to be afraid of and how to avoid the causes of fear.²⁵ It is also a widespread emotional feeling due to previous negative experiences. In this context, the role of fear in shaping human behaviour and ultimately election results is essential in understanding how elections are dominated by emotions. As such, we would like to develop this debate about the politics of flood and fear through the exploration of two elements, namely political distrust of government and political agenda setting. Furthermore, both have the potential to impact voter behaviour, particularly in reducing voter turnout. In fact, turnout is a benchmark and determinant of election results.

Figure 1: Proposed Conceptual Framework



People who have political trust in the government is an indicator of good governance. This political belief exists in the political system, its actors and values. It is also the basis of the government's legitimacy.²⁶ In addition, this trust creates a sense of confidence, security and loyalty towards the trusted party. Meanwhile, political distrust of the government reflects weak governance. The factors that lead to political distrust are poor quality governance, technical inefficiency, poor economic performance, manipulation of reports in government-owned media, suspicion, lack of basic needs and corruption.²⁷ Therefore, political mistrust is a rational human response to a dysfunctional system and a perception of something unreliable or worthless.

Political distrust is also closely related to people's evaluation of policies and their tendency to vote for the opposition party. It can be used to mobilize voters through anti-government sentiment and criticism of government policies.²⁸ This anti-government sentiment can also later develop into anti-politics.²⁹ As a result, disobedience in society can occur. Society will judge that the government or politicians are not able to represent the interests of the people. Some people will also refuse to vote or be involved in the public space. Thus, it can be seen that political distrust comes from moral, technical and interest issues.³⁰

Political distrust occurs due to government actions that are not on the side of the people or inefficiency in protecting the people during a crisis. This situation will increase anxiety in the community and cause people's behaviour to change or create a feeling of fear.³¹ One of them is during natural disasters.³² Based on past experience, the government may be seen as still showing weaknesses in many aspects of natural disaster response such as preparedness, immediate response and long-term response. As a result, for people who do not believe or are not confident in the support and help from the government, they may take their own actions that are considered rational when the situation is critical, to save themselves.

In addition, the media is also relevant in framing or setting the political agenda. Political agenda setting is a process when some issues become a widespread political attention. Content in newspapers, television, radio and now the Internet or social media can influence people's thinking. This is because the more an issue is raised in mass media, the more opportunities for people to get information about the issue. People will also think that the issue is increasingly important.³³ These easily accessible issues then serve to influence their decision making. So, political agenda is also one of the important sources of power. The setting of the political agenda also makes some parties, whether the government or political parties, gain an electoral advantage by focusing public discussion on issues that will favour them in the elections.³⁴

Governments, political parties and politicians can also use fear through the media to scare voters. Fear is a useful tool if it can raise the sensitivity of society. Profits will be gained by exposing threats. This gives the impression that political campaigns may be based on emotions.³⁵ In fact, fear is the most likely negative emotion to mediate agenda setting. If an issue creates fear or anxiety in the community, they may become more anxious, pay more attention to the issue and conclude that the issue is a problem that needs to be emphasized.³⁶ Therefore, issues with a negative element (fear) tend to have a stronger agenda-setting influence compared to issues with a positive element (joy).³⁷

Each individual has the freedom to interpret an issue according to their own opinion. However, through the setting of a political agenda, natural disasters can become a political issue that arouses similar public opinion. This is because the issue of natural disasters is based on uncertainty and anxiety. Furthermore, politicization occurs when natural disasters are framed as a political issue. Hence, there is a conflict between the actors and problematization of the natural disaster management policy. This politicization also occurs when the issue of natural disasters is taken by the actors for political purposes.³⁸ Therefore, natural disasters as a set political agenda can also open up opportunities for actors to trigger policy changes, or stabilize their status quo. The government, political parties and politicians can exploit the current crisis and the fear of the people through the setting of the agenda.³⁹ At the same time, there are the media sources that also emphasize the government's responsibility and accountability during the crisis.

Voter behaviour can be seen in two ways. First, voter choice. Second, turnout. Both will determine the outcome of the election. Voter behaviour is an engagement regardless of whether the voter votes or does not vote in the election. Thus, the three main factors that have a relationship with voter behaviour are party identification, issue orientation and candidate orientation. Party identification is an attachment to one political party and it is quite rare to experience change. Meanwhile, issue orientation and candidate orientation can be the cause of change in voter behaviour.⁴⁰ This is because voters will make rational choices based on their own interests or the interests of society and have made judgments in terms of the most benefits. In fact, this decision was made consciously and based on the information obtained.⁴¹

Consequently, negative reactions, especially fear, may cause voters to not want to participate in democratic processes such as elections. Previously, the individual may have voted. However, due to fear, motivation and behaviour can change. At the same time, fear also makes voters rely on certain information related to the issues they focus on.⁴² In this case, a natural disaster or flood. Moreover, there are voters who have a political distrust of the government. They will choose the 'exit option' by not participating in the election or showing their voice by voting for another political party.⁴³ This way is also to voice their dissatisfaction about the weakness of the government and the democratic system.

The government, political parties and politicians influence the election agenda in various ways. This is because the setting of the agenda causes them to gain an advantage during the election.⁴⁴ Most of the information about the election known to the people is through the media. How much coverage is revealed and the tone of coverage on a particular issue will reflect their views on the election. Especially with toxic information. This situation will make them choose not to vote.⁴⁵ In addition, for the sake of its own agenda, it is also able to trigger emotional reactions and moral panic in the community. Therefore, setting the agenda will challenge democracy because the fear or anxiety of the community can change the behavior of the voters. One of them is the concern about natural disasters such as rain.

Flood Preparedness

It is observed that our country may not be capable of controlling and managing the GE15 if it is conducted during the flood season. This is based on past experience, whereby Malaysia has not been able to manage flood disasters well even though this disaster is not a new phenomenon in our country. This situation can be seen through criticisms of the government's response to the floods that occurred in Malaysia between 2021 and 2022. Specifically, the criticisms expressed include the lack of proper pre-flood warnings, the government's slowness in providing assistance, the government's careless attitude in managing disasters, and the actions of the government using the flood disaster for personal political gain. In general, people's criticism and anger towards the government are reflected through postings on the social media platforms, where people express their anger towards the government through the stated situations. Disappointment and anger regarding the government which is said to be slow to respond to the floods, as well as politicians who took advantage of this disaster for publicity are still heatedly discussed on social media.

Following that, many parties demanded the government to increase the national disaster preparedness as well as reform the national government structure which is considered too big and corrupt.⁴⁶ Not only the people, some online portals such as Free Malaysia Today also criticized the lack of preparedness by the government and the public in facing unexpected situations during the flood season in the specified period.⁴⁷ The attitude of the government that ignored the warnings of the formation of a tropical depression on December 14, 2021 was also questioned. The typhoon then crossed Peninsular Malaysia and brought continuous heavy rain for about two days in the East Coast and Klang Valley areas, causing floods.⁴⁸ This is because the movement of the tropical depression will cause continuous heavy rain in this country. As a result, continuous rain and strong winds can cause flooding in low-lying areas. The whole of Malaysia was seen to be at risk with this disaster, but the government seems to be letting the affected states deal with the disaster without a single clear action.

The government's attitude of using the disaster for their political agenda was also strongly criticized. As stated in the introduction, UMNO's proposal for the dissolution of parliament to make way for the 15th General Election (GE15) was jointly decided in a meeting of the party's Supreme Council (MT), which also represented the interests of the government as it is led by Ismail Sabri who is an UMNO candidate. Their actions are seen to be using the flood issue in demanding an election, showing that the importance of the survival of political parties such as UMNO is greater than preparations in the face of floods.⁴⁹ In addition, criticism was also expressed to the government for not using the national bulk message system to convey information about the flood. This is because through the sophistication of technology that shows almost all Malaysians have access to mobile phones, it should be used by the government in disseminating flood-related information. On the other hand, many parties question the actions of the government that uses the system for things that are considered trivial such as promoting activities related to the Malaysian Family (Keluarga Malaysia) project which is described as pro-government propaganda.

Through the situation stated, Sinar Harian seems to have reprimanded the government by stating that the coordination of humanitarian aid among citizens through social media is much better than flood management by the government.⁵⁰ In fact, this newspaper continues to rebuke the government for the delay in providing aid, which is said to be caused by a 'failure' in coordination between the agencies involved, and if it is true as claimed, this needs to be

corrected immediately. The public's perception of management by the government is also seen as negative with anti-government slogans appearing on social media. The slogan, "the people protect the people", which initially appeared in increasing anger towards the government's management of the COVID-19 pandemic, is also spreading again in the present through the government's action to dissolve parliament to hold the GE15. With the increasing negative perception of the government, we believe this perception will be the main factor in determining the people's vote in the GE15. In fact, it can be clearly seen that the opposition will criticize if the GE15 is held. Consequently, a petition was launched by the PKR Deputy President, Rafizi Ramli, which is *Objection to the GE15 During Floods: Save Lives Not Jobs*, which so far has recorded more than 21,000 signatures obtained among the people.⁵¹ A majority of Kelantanese people do not agree with the GE15 being held at this time, especially when faced with the monsoon season because they see the election at the end of the year causing emotional stress. But for young people, especially those who want to vote for the first time, they are ready to fulfill their responsibilities in any situation. However, it is different for the people aged 50 and above, where they feel it is not appropriate to hold elections during floods.⁵²

In addition to the government, criticism was also made against the preparedness of the Malaysian National Security Council (MKN) to deal with floods in the specified period, especially in Selangor at the end of 2021. This is because it appears as if the MKN's actions in managing the previous floods were forced, since it was rejected by some members of politics, only then the act of rescuing, transferring and distributing the needs to the victims of the disaster was done immediately. This situation is believed to be influenced by different politics, although when dealing with natural disasters, humanity should be prioritized rather than playing on the sentiments of political interests. States ruled by a different party than the Federal government will often not get help from the government immediately. The validity of this is also supported by the report of the location of the displacement which looked very sad and poorly managed. It seemed to show that Malaysia or MKN in particular, have no past experience in disaster management matters. This demonstrated that MKN does not have guidelines for the *modus operandi* because it is clear that the management of this disaster is so multifaceted. In addition to issuing early notices to residents in areas that may be affected, necessities such as food, drink and clean water, clothing and other related items can be immediately sent to the flood evacuation centres. In addition, victims also need to be evacuated immediately when the water rises and not only after the situation becomes worse. Rescue boats, helicopters, four-wheel drive vehicles or any vehicle to evacuate victims should be made available.⁵³

Following the floods that hit several states in the country at the end of last year, the Federal government as well as the respective states announced various types of assistance to ease the burden of the victims. However, various criticisms have been made against the government regarding the post-flood management which is considered to be carried out carelessly and slowly. Several reports from victims expressed frustration that the authorities failed to provide adequate assistance, and had to rely on foreigners and volunteers. At the beginning, the flood victims in Selangor must have been relieved when they were promised *Bantuan Wang Ihsan (BWI)* from the Federal government as well as *Bantuan Selangor Bangkit (BSB)* contributed by the state government, after houses and properties were destroyed due to the disaster. But when the issue arises, they are still waiting because they have not received the promised aid even though the flood has receded for a long time. The Selangor Menteri Besar acknowledged the delay by stating that the delay occurred due to the occurrence of overlapping flood relief applications among Selangor residents.⁵⁴ In fact, there are allegations that there are residents who are irresponsible and take advantage by using many names in the application for

a family, while the assistance provided is only given to one name per family according to their respective residences.

The Selangor Government through the Hulu Kelang State Assembly Member, Saari Sungib, criticized Prime Minister Ismail Sabri for the delay in providing flood aid to the people of Selangor, although we have stated that the Selangor Government also acknowledged the delay in providing flood aid.⁵⁵ However, in politics, it is not impossible if political actors try to point out their own weaknesses against the opponent. He claimed that the delay was malicious and called on the flood victims to sue Ismail over the issue. This statement was later contradicted by Shahril Sufian Hamdan who said that Ismail had cooperated behind the scenes in flood disaster management. Meanwhile, Ismail admitted that there were indeed some weaknesses in post-flood management under his administration.⁵⁶

The National Disaster Management Agency (NADMA) has also been criticized by various parties for being silent in post-flood management and ignoring flood warnings.⁵⁷ In addition, NADMA was criticized for allegedly failing to direct the military for the purpose of post-flood relief until the military began deploying their own aid.⁵⁸ However, NADMA denied that they had prevented the military from helping flood victims or that there was a misunderstanding between them and the military. On December 20, 2021, the Dewan Rakyat Speaker, Azhar Azizan Harun's action to ignore the request of opposition members of parliament to discuss the flood was criticized by the public. His actions were protested by the government and the opposition, with some calling for Azhar to resign. In this regard, Azhar stated that the action was carried out based on the Dewan Rakyat protocol, where the members of the House have to propose a call to discuss a matter to him at least a day before it is discussed.⁵⁹ At the Selangor State Government level, there is a controversy regarding the position of the MKN chairman at the state level, between Menteri Besar Amirudin Shari and Noh Omar. This issue followed the question of who held the position when criticism was expressed against MKN for post-flood management problems. In November, Amirudin handed over his position as the Selangor MKN chairman to Noh Omar. However, following the flood disaster, the position was returned to Amirudin from December 25, 2021.⁶⁰ However, this issue is criticized by various parties because it is seen as unimportant and shows that political actors like to seek publicity through unimportant issues and make trivial issues in their political agenda.

Criticism and Views of Political Figures Related to GE15 in Flood Season

Before the dissolution of parliament was announced on October 10, 2022, it can be clearly seen that UMNO's call to hasten the dissolution of parliament has received various reactions among opposition and government political figures. This situation is certainly not strange because the opposition really functions as a check and balance against the decisions and actions taken by the government. Several political figures from the PN component that formed the Malaysian government until the dissolution of the GE14 parliament also expressed their views on the desire for the GE15 to be held during the flood season. However, it must be emphasized here that the call made by UMNO does not represent the position of the federal government. Dr. Mahathir Mohamad, for example, who represents the Gerakan Tanah Air (GTA), reiterated his position that the GE15 is not suitable to be held during the flood season.⁶¹ This is because for him, the people should not be put at risk to go out and vote. He added:

“The election period should be free from floods and high winds so that everyone can go out and vote safely.”⁶²

For him, if the GE15 is held within the stated period, it will only benefit UMNO and when many will not go out to vote, they will get support. They do not care if many people will be affected when they go out and vote during the flood season because they just want to win the election. On the other hand, Tun suggested that the GE15 be held after the flood season to avoid any untoward incident against voters who come out to fulfill their responsibilities. He added:

“The right time is a calm time, not during a disaster, there is no flood or strong wind. If it's a flood season, not only does it make movement difficult, but it may even cause misfortune such as injury or death.”⁶³

Anwar Ibrahim also stated the same thing when he emphasized that the GE15 is not aimed at returning the mandate to the people, but instead threatens and oppresses the people. He questioned the attitude of certain parties who are willing to risk the fate of the people because of greed for power. For him, PKR described the GE15 as appropriate to be held next year following the flood forecast at the end of 2022. This is a responsibility in setting the GE date at the appropriate time and not burdening the people.⁶⁴ In fact, if examined in depth, Anwar's criticism of the implementation of the GE15 during the flood season is due to his own experience of seeing that the Federal government lacked commitment in facing the floods at the end of 2021. He claimed that many ministers disappeared when floods hit several states in December 2021.⁶⁵

In order to safeguard the interests of the people, Anwar who is the leader of the opposition announced in three states under the leadership of PH, that the State Legislative Assembly (DUN) will not be dissolved like the parliament. This is because Anwar insisted that the government of Selangor, Negeri Sembilan and Penang will focus on the welfare of the people, including making preparations to deal with the floods. The main focus is dealing with flood problems and easing the burden of victims who have to face flood disasters. He said:

“They will not hold elections until the flood issue is resolved. They have time to fix the dissolution of state assembly after that (flood). They will not be with the federal government, if the general election is held during the flood.”⁶⁶

We see Anwar's actions through Pakatan Harapan as one of their political strategies in showing that they care about the welfare of the people. If this action is accompanied by effective propaganda, it can attract the attention of the residents to vote for them as a result of being deceived by the priority of looking after their welfare rather than the desire to hold elections. However, this action will also involve losses in terms of people's time, energy and money due to the parliamentary and state elections being held separately on different dates, which will definitely make it difficult for the people to vote.

Meanwhile, Perikatan Nasional through its chairman, Muhyiddin Yassin has insisted that the GE15 should not be held in 2022 as the North East monsoon with floods is expected to hit the country, especially in the East Coast states. This is because the flood season will affect the course of the election, in addition to making it more difficult for people to go out to vote. The government should focus on preparing for the flood season, while continuing to focus on accelerating the country's post-pandemic recovery process. He added:

“The solution to this problem must be given full focus by the government, especially through the 2023 Budget. Members of the Cabinet of Ministers from PN have been asked to set this position at the Cabinet of Ministers Meeting and PN Members of Parliament have also been asked to take the same position.”⁶⁷

He suggested that parliament should be dissolved in 2023 to enable the GE15 to be held after the flood season. This is in line with what has been set in the constitution every five years, but the election term has not yet ended and there are still a few months left. Furthermore, if the GE15 is held in 2022, there are some states which do not agree to dissolve the State Legislative Assembly (DUN) and this will result in additional costs of holding state elections, to be borne by the Election Commission for an estimated RM2 billion.⁶⁸ Along with the position stated, several states under PN such as Kedah, Kelantan and Terengganu also adhere to the same position as PH and have decided not to dissolve the state assembly in 2022.⁶⁹

The actions taken by the listed states are indeed unique and the priorities for the population are closely related to the socioeconomic needs and welfare of the population. The process of approaching and courting the population is still considered conservative in Kelantan and Kedah, except for Terengganu⁷⁰. Therefore, due to the flood factor which is seen as not the right time to treat and approach the people in the stated states, that is the reason why PN through Muhyidin Yassin had insisted on rejecting the GE15 during the flood season. According to Mohamed Noor and Daud (2016), Kelantan politics and elections are often considered to be a unique political phenomenon. This is because while other states in the Peninsular Malaysia, consistently, before the 2008 General Election (GE) voted for Barisan Nasional (BN), voters in Kelantan continued to vote for Parti Islam Se-Malaysia (PAS) as the state government, especially since the the GE in 1990. In fact, we see that it is difficult for the people of Kelantan to change due to the fanaticism and partisan spirit that has kept PAS as the state government in Kelantan since 1990 until now.⁷¹

Meanwhile, Hadi Awang, who represents PAS, had expressed his views regarding the dissolution of parliament through a broadcast titled, "Dissolution of Parliament: PAS' current political stance" through Harakahdaily on October 4, 2022:

“PAS expressed the view that the dissolution of parliament in the near term is inappropriate and does not need to be rushed, taking into account the factors of economic recovery and the expected monsoon season which makes it difficult for the people and the government machinery. PAS will continue discussions and negotiations with all parties (political parties, NGOs, academics, community leaders) towards the success of the ummah unity agenda, in order to reach common ground and avoid clashes with each other, thereby defeating Pakatan Harapan. PAS insists that in any case, the interests of the country and the people must come first, in addition to economic recovery measures that need to continue to be supported, particularly through the 2023 Budget that will be presented.”

“ISLAM UNITES THE UMMAH”

“MALAYSIA SEJAHTERA (PROSPEROUS MALAYSIA)”

Abdul Hadi Awang
President of PAS

From the statement above, PAS insists that the dissolution of parliament to hold the GE15 is not appropriate. In fact, the government should not have to act as stated. PAS has such a view after taking into account the factors of economic recovery and the expected monsoon season which can make it difficult for the people as well as the government machinery.⁷² PAS does not agree with UMNO's insistence to hold the 15th General Election (GE-15) immediately following the increase in Covid-19 cases in the country, in addition to the worsening floods. He added:

“Let Covid-19 and floods be over first. There will be no elections in the middle of floods and the spread of Covid-19.”

“We have to discuss with the relevant parties, including the Ministry of Health, especially in the uncertain flood weather because we do not want to burden the people.”⁷³

PAS agrees if the GE15 is postponed for a while and held at the end of the current government's term. Nevertheless, PAS is indeed always preparing for the GE15, but at the same time, warns that it does not need to be rushed so as not to trouble the people who are struggling with economic, security and other problems.⁷⁴ Clearly, the views of PAS through Hadi Awang are not surprising and it is inevitable that PAS will use factors such as floods as the main reason for not agreeing to the GE15 being held during the monsoon season in Malaysia. We also see that PAS has put the need to fight PH in the GE15 and shows that the interest of PAS is not just to disagree with the GE15 being held during the monsoon season, it seems to show that the importance of facing floods is the same as fighting PH. Such a statement as previously emphasized is not surprising even though PAS's position is considered weak due to UMNO having declared that they are alone in the GE15.

Overall, despite only listing some of the parties' views, it can be concluded that they hold the same opinion, which is to oppose the implementation of the GE15 during the monsoon season in Malaysia. In fact, it is believed that their views represent the grass roots' position of supporters from all over Malaysia and this situation is against UMNO, who want the GE15 to be implemented immediately. The main leader of UMNO, Zahid Hamidi has stated that Barisan

Nasional (BN) is willing to wade through floods and heavy rain for the GE15.⁷⁵ This extraordinary willingness can also be expected because political actors are willing to sacrifice anything during the election to win votes, political agenda and sympathy among the people. In fact, through the views expressed by the opposition, it can be concluded that the GE15 would be held without proper preparation, could create fear among the people, and thus might influence the behavior of the voters, instead of representing the actual results of the GE and so on.

The Views of Malaysian Academics and Political Analysts

This research had interviewed several academics and political analysts in the country to discuss the flood issue that will affect the course of the GE15 in Malaysia. Overall, all respondents have diverse backgrounds and often appear on television and newspapers through national political analysis. Dr Sahul Hamid Mohamed Maiddin, who is a political analyst from Universiti Pendidikan Sultan Idris, believes that Malaysians have two options, if the parliament is not dissolved, the political turmoil that is plaguing this country will not end soon. If the parliament is dissolved, we face the risk of flooding. Based on the various data that can be accessed, the election in this flood season is not a prudent decision. Until 30 September 2022, some experts generally agree that the end of 2022 is not the right time to hold a general election. The Department of Meteorology Malaysia (MetMalaysia) had earlier warned that heavy rains will begin in mid-November 2022, which risks causing floods in many areas. Accordingly, the Ministry of Environment and Water has also issued a list of flood hot spots by state.

Is the ruling party prepared to bear the risk of traditional voters here not going out to vote because of bad weather? It is up to them, if they are still too confident. In addition, meteorologist Prof. Azizan Abu Samah has also stated the same thing. We cannot compare the situation in November 1999, when the GE10 was held during the monsoon season. The Indian Ocean Dipole (IOD), a sea surface temperature condition in the Indian Ocean, in November 1999 and the 2022 period are not the same. In 2022, the IOD index is at risk of causing high rainfall, thus resulting in major floods in Kelantan, Terengganu, Pahang and Johor. This opinion is reinforced by findings from the Asean Specialized Meteorological Centre and supported by the Australian Meteorological Bureau.

Quoting a statement from Dr. Jeniri Amir, a political analyst and former academician at the Universiti Malaysia Sarawak (UNIMAS), the rainy season and floods will limit the number of voter turnout. As a result, the winning party could actually win with a small number of votes, and form a government that would not reflect a mandate from the majority of Malaysians. The government may have gotten the most votes, but not the biggest mandate. Elections during the flood season will cause the country's pockets to be emptied, to cover election expenses and to manage the flood disaster that hit the country. With the fall in the value of the Ringgit and rampant inflation, our country's money expenditure is faced with two options, at the moment. For the election or for the flood disaster? The EC chairman himself announced that the upcoming general election's spending will exceed RM1.1 billion! Yes, although we can argue "even if next year we still have to spend the same amount," but we are talking about priorities, *fiqh al-awlawiyat*. At this time, such a large amount of money can be used to mobilize all government machinery to help and save the people who are suffering from floods.

Dr Sahul Hameed continued his argument by stating that the flood will give an advantage to BN who is currently holding the reins of government. This is because the government will mobilize all its machinery to carry out search and rescue work. This will directly give 'political mileage' if it is done by using the label of the ruling party in its operations. However, if a major flood hits, he is in the opinion that it will cause problems for BN. The people will be badly affected by the decision to hold this election. There will be feelings of restlessness and hatred among the people towards the government after that. At the same time, the opposition parties can manipulate this mood to vent their anger on BN and vote for the opposition parties in future elections.⁷⁶

Dr. Suffian Mansor, who is a political analyst from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, also stated the same thing. For him, the need to dissolve parliament depends on the current political needs if it needs to be dissolved, it should be dissolved based on the maximum period that has been practiced for a long time. He is in the opinion that the dissolution of parliament is dependent on the authority of His Majesty. It is necessary for Malaysians to clearly understand that the parliament consists of three components, namely the Yang di-Pertuan Agong, the Dewan Negara and the Dewan Rakyat (Article 44). Even so, only the Dewan Rakyat was dissolved. When it mentions the dissolution of parliament, it means the dissolution of the Dewan Rakyat. He holds the position that there is no need for the parliament to be dissolved because Malaysia is not ready to implement the GE15 during the flood season. Through last year's experience, it was found that Malaysia still failed to deal with floods well. Even historical records have shown that the flood issue is a social issue that has never been resolved before and after the country's independence.

According to him, the flood will indeed affect the behavior of the voters and that the national political parties have made the issue of flood as their political agenda. The voters will see that their security is at stake through the implementation of the GE15 at this time, and thus will influence the thinking of the voters, especially the younger generation regarding the importance of voting. He believes that it will cause this generation to be less interested in knowing about national politics. The percentage of the number of fence-sitters will increase from time to time as they see that the country's politics are in a bad state and only represent the interests of certain parties for their political survival. In the face of a flood that will inevitably cause loss of time, energy and money, voters will certainly not risk their lives to vote if there is no guarantee of their safety. From another aspect, he feels that the journey of the GE15 during the flood will affect the voting centers due to the fact that the flood victims are also placed in schools, which are usually turned into flood settlement centres and at the same time become voting locations. This situation will give rise to suspicion and dissatisfaction of all parties involved in the election and it will certainly lead to political interference.⁷⁷

Meanwhile, according to Dr. Jamaie Hamil, who is also a political analyst from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, if the GE15 is held during the flood season, UMNO has the opportunity to garner more support and make the flood issue a setting of their political agenda. This is because the BN machinery are experienced in managing the country, especially handling disasters such as floods that occur in Malaysia every year for the last 60 years of their rule in Malaysia. When the GE15 is conducted during the flood, it would give space and opportunity to the competing political parties to go down to the flood location and persuade the people to vote for them. BN has the advantages as stated and it is certain that they will move quickly in helping the people during the flood. With the strength of the BN's election machinery which is very strong throughout the country, they will be confident to face the GE15 during the flood season. This situation gives BN an advantage over other parties, although there

is no denying that each competing party will have its own strategy in reaching out and helping voters affected by the flood.

The GE15 which is held during the flood season make it difficult for the people and affect their behavior and thinking. For example, if there is a severe flood that causes many houses to be damaged, it will be the reason why residents will choose not to vote. However, the people's decisions will change if they receive flood relief quickly from the authorities. At the same time, heavy floods will affect the turnout. It is certain that this situation will give BN an advantage due to the records of by-elections after the GE14, such as those held in Malacca⁷⁸ and Johor⁷⁹, which have favoured BN due to the very low turnout compared to the GE14.⁸⁰

There was a different opinion from Dr. Norasmahani Hussain, who is an academic from Universiti Sains Malaysia, related to the flood issue affecting the GE15. According to her, the GE15 which will be held during the flood season is influenced by the new 2023 budget offer presented by the Malaysian Government on October 7, 2022. If the people of Malaysia are interested in the offer given, it is certain that the people will vote for the political party in question and reject the flood issue which is said to affect the behavior of the people in the GE15. The Malaysian Government's action to present the 2023 budget and dissolve parliament afterwards is a political strategy that is believed to favour the party that forms the government at that time. In fact, it will weaken the opposition as they will not have the opportunity to present the same offer, thus giving BN an advantage in attracting the attention of Malaysians to vote for them. In other aspects, it is believed that the turnout will be low due to the frustration of the Malaysian population towards the unstable political situation of the country, where Malaysia made history with the appointment of three Prime Ministers through the GE14.⁸¹

The last respondent was Dr. Junaidi Awang Besar, who is an experienced political analyst from Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia. He reiterated that according to history, the GE10 was held during a flood in 1999. At that time, PAS managed to win in several states, for example, in Terengganu and Kelantan.⁸² However, the turnout was low at around 70% and there were no mass protests like now. He believes that the SPR, the Malaysia Civil Defense Force, Fire and Rescue Departments and others will be in full alert if the election is held during the flood season. This shows that the election can be held at any time through the stated readiness. This will be facilitated through preliminary preparation and planning by the authorities before the election is held. If the election is held during the flood season, it will not be as bad as described by certain parties, as the flood in Malaysia is even not as bad as in Indonesia. However, there is no denying that holding elections in the flood season is a political strategy and agenda of the parties involved. Even so, die-hard UMNO voters, for example, do not care about the floods and will still vote for their favourite party.

The implications of floods depends on logistics and the role of the authorities. The authorities should have made early preparations to help voters in the flood-affected areas. For example, the SPR will usually extend the voting time until 6 pm. It is the responsibility of Malaysians to vote even though the election is held during the monsoon season. It also depends on political literacy and people's awareness. Spoiled voters will use the excuse that dealing with flood is an inappropriate time to vote.⁸³

Overall, through the results of the interviews with the listed respondents, it was found that they clearly stated the flood was indeed among the political agenda in the pre-GE15. Although there are disagreements among the respondents, it is obvious that the flood issue has become a political agenda that will be brought by political parties to show their concern for the

welfare of the people. At the same time, four respondents seemed to agree by saying that the flood will affect the behaviour of the voters. Only through the acts of kindness to the people of Malaysia affected by the floods can they quickly change their stance in the GE15. This situation will actually be a competition for all the political parties enrolled in the GE15, in giving the best offer during the flood, thus influencing the behaviour of flood victims in the GE15.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it can be observed that the rumours that the GE-15 will be held at the end of 2022 and the flood season have finally come true. This matter has caused various reactions, especially from the politicians, academics and society. Some of them agreed that elections can be held during the flood season because the country has the relevant machinery and equipment. It is also a political strategy that will be used by any government. However, most of them actually do not agree with the action. This is because the government's past experiences in managing floods showed that they did not perform well. Floods not only have a negative impact on the safety of life and property, but they also result in psychological effects on flood victims. This also causes other citizens who have never been affected by floods to become afraid because floods can happen at any time, unexpectedly and at any location. Therefore, this situation has created fear in the community if they have to go out and vote in the GE-15. News reports and discussions on social media present increasing concern among the community. The setting of such a political agenda, nonetheless, will benefit some parties, especially the government and politicians. It is likely to influence voter behaviour in the election, in addition to a lower turnout. Therefore, this study concludes that the politics of flood and fear have the potential to influence the voters, whether they will go out to vote or otherwise, and would have an impact on the election results.

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Notes

¹ Propaganda generally means an ideology or opinion that spreads to influence society. Propaganda works to filter the media so that the publication and dissemination of information to the public does not show the faults and weaknesses of a government. Thus, propaganda becomes an important instrument for the government in influencing the public's thinking to always support the government's policies. Refer: Gunaish, C. F., Abdullah, M. F., & Wan Teh, W. H., "Propaganda dan Perang Saraf British di Tanah Melayu melalui Malayan Film Unit (MFU) 1946–1957 (British Propaganda and Psychological Warfare in Malaya through the Malayan Film Unit (MFU) 1946–1957)", *Wacana Seni: Journal of Arts Discourse*, Vol. 21, pp. 93-107.

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Interview

Interview with Dr. Suffian Mansor at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, October 21, 2022.

Interview with Dr. Jamaei Hamil at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, October 22, 2022.

Interview with Dr. Junaidi Awang Besar at Universiti Kebangsaan Malaysia, October 25, 2022.

Virtual interview with Dr Sahul Hamid Mohamed Maiddin, October 20, 2022.

Virtual interview with Dr. Norasmahani Hussain, October 23, 2022.